

“Compassion”
Matthew 9: 35- 10:8
June 15, 2008

I'm sure that like me, you were all shocked last week to see the news coverage concerning the hit and run accident which left a 78 year old Hartford resident paralyzed and in critical condition. As that now infamous police surveillance video shows, Angel Torres was walking home from the corner store where he had just bought some milk when 2 cars came speeding down the street on the wrong side of the road. The first, a tan Honda just missed Mr. Torres. The second, a dark Honda did not. That second car hit Mr. Torres squarely, sending him flying over the roof of the car, arms and legs flailing like a rag doll before landing helplessly in the middle of the street.

As both cars sped away from the scene of the accident, 9 other cars drove by Mr. Torres without stopping. On the sidewalk many people walked by without lending a hand. Some inched curiously to the corner to have a better look, others dial 911 on their cell phones, but until a police cruiser just happened by the scene nearly 2 minutes later, not one person went into the street to offer this gravely injured man any sort of comfort or assistance at all.

Commenting on the situation, Mr. Torres son Angel Arce told the New York Times *“It makes me angry and it leaves me hurt. To think of him there and no one to grab his hand, to offer comfort. He was always there helping everyone in their time of need and in his time, no one was there for him.”*

We have so much to be proud of as a nation. We are the freest, most successful and affluent nation on the planet earth. We are educated, cultured and are seemingly able to do just about anything that we put our minds to. But what have we come to when we drive our cars past a critically injured 78 year old man who is lying injured in the street? We have wealth, success, beautiful homes and extravagant lifestyles. But this story serves to remind us that for all that we are, and all that we have as a nation, there seems to be something that we have lost. A very central something that once defined who we are as a nation. A very important something that will be necessary for us to recover if we want to create or sustain a safe and successful society into the 21st century and beyond. And that central and important something is compassion.

Once upon a time, we used to be a people who were known for their compassion. Our nation is built upon the dreams of millions of immigrants who were welcomed with open arms, understanding their need to find a place to start a new life. We looked for the best in everyone, and as our mother's taught us, if we didn't have anything good to say about someone, we didn't say anything. Understanding was at the heart of who we were.

It's been said, "*Before you criticize someone, walk a mile in their shoes.*" But unfortunately today, our brand of compassion reads more like the e mail that I received the other day that said, "*Before you criticize someone, walk a mile in their shoes. Then you're a mile away when you criticize them, and you've got their shoes.*"

As musician Todd Rundgren once sang, "*there is nothing so cold as a world without compassion.*" And stories like that of Angel Torres suggest that the world in the year of our Lord 2008 has become a very cold place where we are losing, or have perhaps totally lost the ability to love our neighbor as our self.

That's why Jesus' words from Matthew's gospel that we read this morning are so important for us today as we work together to build the world as it will exist in the 21st century. In this passage which we read together this morning, Jesus has established his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing and is in the beginning stages of turning the work of his Kingdom over to his followers. In Matthew's words, "*Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity.*"

The suffering, persecution, temptation and sorrow that Jesus had to endure during his ministry is hard for us to imagine. Here was Jesus, a humble rabbi from a backwoods town who traveled all over the ancient near east by foot. He went from town to town healing the sick, feeding the hungry and offering hope and salvation to the lost. He was a friend to the friendless, and a constant advocate for the "least of these" that filled his world. And what did Jesus get in return for all the good that he did? Scorn, ridicule and finally a brutally painful death on a cross.

Jesus gave everything that he had, even his very life in his pursuit of spreading the love and healing of his Heavenly Father, and he never asked for anything in return. Jesus never owned a home, or had a family. He never knew what it was to sit around the table at the end of the day sharing stories with his wife and children as did most of those that he ministered to. As Jesus himself said, *“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.”* Jesus work was hard, his suffering was great, and he got nothing in return in terms of the sort of compensation or respect that we might demand today for such a life. And so what was it that drove Jesus to live so selflessly? What was it that enabled Him to work and love so hard, and receive only condemnation, suffering, persecution in return?

What was the magic ingredient that Jesus’ possessed that enabled him to have such love that he was willing to literally lay down his life for his friends? Matthew tells us in verse 36 when he writes, *“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”*

Jesus was consumed with compassion. Jesus saw the harassment of the masses and was willing to be harassed in their stead. Jesus saw the helpless state of the poor and innocent and Jesus was willing to offer them help. Jesus saw that the people were without a shepherd, and he risked his own reputation and safety in order to guide and care for them in a way that was impossible for the Scribes and Pharisees who had only their own selfish best interest in mind. Jesus was filled with, and motivated by an overwhelming sense of compassion. Jesus felt the people’s pain, and took it upon himself. Jesus saw the people’s suffering and entered into it with them. And finally, Jesus saw the devastating effect that sin was having on His Father’s creation and so he himself was willing to die a sinner’s death in order that the power of sin might be forever taken away.

The needs of our modern world are nearly endless. There is poverty on every continent and every street corner. In New Delhi and New London, hunger, life threatening hunger is a way of life for far too many people. Deadly, but treatable diseases like AIDS threaten to eradicate the population of entire continents. And wars like the one in Iraq are claiming the lives of millions of our sons and daughters.

And here we sit, privileged citizens of the most blessed and powerful nation in the world, and we have to ask ourselves what are we going to do about it?

Will we look the other way like the drivers on that street in Hartford, imagining that the suffering that we see is someone else's problem? Or will we, like Jesus, feel the pain and suffering of the least of these and show love to Jesus himself by living lives of compassionate action on behalf of the helpless and hopeless of the world?

Jesus said to his disciples, "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*" My friends, we are those laborers. There is indeed a rich harvest of peace, grace, and joy outside of these doors today for anyone of us that has the compassion and conviction to follow Jesus' example, and respond to Jesus' call to heal the world. Jesus is calling us to stop our cars, get out into the street, and take the suffering of the world by the hand. The kingdom is at hand, heal the world with the compassionate love of Christ. Amen.